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AUTHOR Wandersman, Lois Pall; Wandersman, Abraham
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ABSTRACT

This document reports on the Family Development Project which is aimed at developing a systematic model of parenting support for new families and evaluating its effects on family development. Parenting groups of six to ten couples begin meeting about six to eight weeks after delivery and meet weekly for six weeks, then monthly for four more sessions. Group leaders (a male-female team trained in leadership and experienced in parenting) integrate direct teaching of child development information with informal discussion and sharing of experiences. Each meeting focuses on a topic of interest related to both adult and infant development (such as initial adjustment to the baby, infant care, husband and wife relationship after the baby). The goals, assumptions, and techniques of the parenting groups are described and are illustrated with a description of one of the sessions. (Author/MS)

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FACILITATING GROWTH FOR ALL THE FAMILY IN THE ADJUSTMENT TO A NEWBORN*

A Report by the Family Development Project [1,2]

Lois Pall Wandersman
Demonstration and Research Center in Early Education

and

Abraham Wandersman
Center for Community Studies

The John F. Kennedy Center for Research on
Education and Human Development

George Peabody College
Nashville, Tennessee

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For the first time in modern social history a sizeable number of couples are weighing the costs of having children and deciding against childrearing. Many of the recent social changes, including mobility from kin, women working, and marital instability, have diminished some of the traditional reasons and supports for having children with little new to replace them (Bronfenbrenner, 1975). Many couples are questioning the compatibility of parenting with their own life-styles and values for self-growth.

For some time now, evidence has been accumulating that having a baby is a crisis for which couples are unprepared and for which old roles and adjustments are inadequate (LeMasters, 1957; Caplan, 1964; Dyer, 1963; Holmes & Rahe, 1967; Rossi, 1968).

According to Campbell (1975), couples raising young children feel more stressed than people in any other stage of life (except divorced women), although they still report relatively high satisfaction with their lives. Feldman (unpublished) finds couples in early childbearing years to be less satisfied with their marriages than couples in other stages. Beckman (1974) finds that working women (mothers and childless) view the rewards of parenthood as less than the rewards of work. However, these cross-sectional surveys do not study how couples cope with and adjust to the stresses of childrearing over time.

Burton White (1975) summarizes the three major obstacles that families cope with in trying to do the best they can for their children and which can interfere with the development of competent children and competent parents: ignorance, stress and lack of

assistance. "Just before and soon after the baby is born is a special time. A lot of parents are traumatized. They suddenly come face to face with the reality that they've got responsibility for this fragile little thing and they don't know what to do (White, 1975, p. 40)."

Rapid change in the prevailing views on childrearing and the isolation of the nuclear family make the traditional informal modes of dissemination of childrearing information through modelling and exchanging inadequate. Although there has been a proliferation of new aids to parenting, these have not, for a variety of reasons, filled the need new parents voice for support during the initial crisis after childbirth.

For families of newborns, patterns of family interaction have not solidified, so that families at this time are especially open to support. Caplan (1964) contends that "during the upset of a crisis, a person usually has an increased desire to be helped and is more susceptible to influence than during periods of relatively stable functioning." This would appear to be especially true in the new family which is adjusting to each other.

Although many small-scale, informal post-partum groups now exist, their approaches have not been systematic and their effects have not been documented. The Family Development Project aims at developing a systematic model of parenting support for new families and evaluating its effects on family development.

The Family Development Project grew out of our own experiences, crises, and satisfactions with our baby. It aims at making the

difficult job of parenting less isolated and more rewarding through information, sharing experiences, and social support. The Project includes:

1. Pre-partum meeting: A film ('Newborn") and discussion of expectant parents' concerns, to provide an overview of the initial adjustment to having a baby.
2. Parenting Groups: A series of group meetings through the first six months after the baby's birth to facilitate the growth and adjustment couples and babies make as they become a family.
3. Parenting Study: A research effort to find out more about the stresses and satisfactions of becoming a family.

The Parenting Groups provide the main focus of the project. Groups of 6 to 10 couples begin meeting as soon after delivery as possible, and meet weekly for 6 weeks and monthly for 4 more sessions. Each meeting focuses on a topic of interest to new parents, often featuring a film or guest speaker. Each meeting integrates information with informal discussion and sharing experiences. Topics are tailored to the interests of the group. Topics include initial adjustment to the baby, infant development, baby care, husband and wife relationship after the baby, etc. (Appendix 1). Groups are led by a male-female team, trained in group leadership skills and experienced in parenting.

The basic goals and assumptions of the Family Development Project are similar to those of group education for family life:

> to help parents become more familiar with basic concepts of child growth and development and parent-child interaction from a dynamic point of view; to recognize some of the crisis points in different stages of the normal family cycle; to clarify the parents' own role and those of their children, within the family and the community; and to enlarge their understanding of the complexity of their everyday situations so that they will have a wider background against which to make choices (Auerbach, 1968, p. 5).

Like parent group education, the Family Development Project recognizes the importance of the parent's own activity in structuring the learning experience through influencing its content, applying his/her own experience to it, and applying it to his/her own experience. However, it assumes that for different purposes different methods may be most appropriate: for example, mixing (a), sharing experiences to provide social support; (b) didactic teaching to provide child development information, and (c) role playing to practice communication skills.

The effects of the parenting groups on such indices as marital adjustment, attitudes toward childrearing, task allocation, and social support is being investigated. Questionnaires are being administered to parents in the parenting groups and to a control group. The questionnaires are administered on three occasions corresponding to the beginning, middle, and end of the meeting sequence. The control group consists of a sample of new parents from neighboring communities who are matched on major demographic variables and who would be interested in attending the parent groups if they were available locally. By comparing the parents in the parenting groups with the control parents we will have pilot data on the effects of the intervention program. In addition,

data is provided on the changes which occur with the birth of the first baby and the different patterns of adjustment to it.

Parenting Groups: Facilitating Development

The Family Development Project is concerned with making the experience of becoming a family an opportunity for development for each of its members and dyads and for the family as a whole. The Family Development Project is based on the following assumptions:

--Having a first baby is seen as a developmental problem for the parents as individuals, couples, and as a family. It is a crisis in that "Roles have to be reassigned, status positions shifted, values reoriented, and needs met through new channels(LeMasters, 1957)." The impact of the parenting crisis will depend on (1) the nature of the crisis, (2) the stage of organization or disorganization of the family at the point of parenting, and (3) the resources of the family (Shereshefsky & Yarrow, 1974), and (4) its previous experience with crises. For example, the impact of the parenting crisis for a particular family will depend on (1) having a normal or problem infant (handicapped, premature), (2) being a close-knit or differentiated couple or a single parent, (3) having personal resources (money, skills, maturity), a social network (friends, relatives), and a service network (medical professionals, discussion groups), to provide support during the crisis, and (4) the nature of previous adaptations to stresses (coping, fleeing).

--The resolution of the parenting crisis can represent developmental growth for the individuals, dyads, and family systems. Effective adaptation to parenting can involve developmental growth

for the family and all its subsystems. Less effective adaptations to parenting crises can involve developmental fixation or regression of any of the family subsystems or even the dissolution of the family.

--Effective adaptation to the parenting crisis can be facilitated by increasing the resources available to the family. This can include augmenting personal resources (e.g., increasing parenting skills), strengthening the social network (e.g., contacting parents who are in the same period or who have resolved crises), and strengthening the service network (providing a parenting support system directly aimed at reaching this group as well as coordinating other services for these families).

For many couples having a baby has become a conscious matter of choice, and many of the traditional ways of rearing a child are also being scrutinized and challenged. The roles of the mother, father, and infant are frequently not viewed as defined by nature of sex but by individual characteristics. The Family Development Project assumes that the development of the family and its members will be optimized by facilitating the individualization of the roles to the characteristics of its members rather than by stereotyping. Thus the Parenting Groups integrate the use of information, increasing skills, sharing experiences, and social support in order to increase the formulation of individualized styles for family life.

To illustrate the approach, we will describe a session of the Changes in the Husband-Wife Relationship (Appendix 2 presents a detailed outline for this session.) The session opens with participants sharing the ways that their relationships have changed

since having a baby and some of the problems that have arisen. The leaders then use role playing to highlight the importance of communication in dealing with this adjustment. Then leaders use a combination of didactic presentation, discussion, role playing, and written material to teach new communication techniques. Thus the session's aims are to: (1) share the problems and satisfactions that having a baby has brought for the marital relationship, to clarify them, to empathize with them, and to emphasize their normality; (2) wider perceptions of couples to alternative approaches to these changes; (3) provide skills for developing mutually satisfying problem-solving.

Thus the Family Development Project hopes to emphasize the joy and challenge of growing together as a family. We are enthusiastic about the possibilities.

> Now that having children is for most Americans a matter of choice--not chance--perhaps today's parents will develop a new vocabulary to describe the satisfactions of giving life to someone else. That message may never find proper articulation, however, so long as parents feel pressured by a society that gives them little status or support (Newsweek, September 22, 1975, p. 56).

The Family Development Project plans to listen for and encourage the new vocabulary of family support. And we need lots of ears and voices to join us.

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